

# The Clipper Visits Cpt. Barry Eldridge

BY MYRNA WALSH



Captain Barry Eldridge, USCG, sits before a wall of pictures, many of which were done by his mother, Virginia Shabaz.

Captain Barry Eldridge, USCG, has a dirty job.

This Colonial Drive resident is in charge of cleaning up the messes that foul the coastal waters from Hampden Beach south to the Cape and the Islands.

He's quick to point out that he doesn't hold back the black tide by himself. A staff of 60 Coast Guardsmen work directly for him and he can call on about 35 boats attached to the USCG stations that dot the shore. In cases of major pollution, he can reach out to the National Strike Unit which will fly in specialized pollution control equipment from its base in New Jersey.

Eldridge explained how technology has raced to control the damage of oil and gasoline spills. "Back in the beginning we used hay because it was plentiful and not too many other devices had been put together. Now we have instruments that work more efficiently." It might reassure conservationists that no chemicals are used to mop up the oil. Containment booms corral the gunk which is then skimmed or vacuumed into holding tanks.

This area hasn't experienced a spill on the scale of

## PEOPLE - ELDRIDGE

rules and regulations, most specifically the port and tanker safety act, which was created in response to the Argo Merchant and Global Hope spills.

"A lot of conditions that existed before the Argo Merchant simply do not exist anymore. We don't even get that kind of vessel close to the shore any more. Many of them have gone out of the U.S. trade because they know they'll be boarded frequently here and if they're having trouble with their cargo handling equipment or pumps or leaks, they'll have to fix them before they leave. And if they're bad enough, we won't even let them come in to discharge cargo. And that's happened a number of times."

His men board at least 2 ships a day, but often 3 or 4. And nearly every ship to enter the port is observed.

"Historically there have been problems with the flag of convenience countries -- Panama, Honduras, Libya. You could pretty well depend on some ships under certain flags being in poor condition. But that's not true anymore. At least in the port of Boston. You'll frequently find better and newer ships -- better and newer than U.S. flagships -- flying the Libyan flag," he said.

Eldridge mentioned 3 instances in one week in which American ships were not properly maintained. Disciplinary action would then be taken against the master (captain) and first mates. Although shipping may be the game of magnates, sailing is still the responsibility of the man with the gold braid on his sleeve. "The master is responsible for the vessel being in a seaworthy condition before it leaves the pier. Granted, he is under certain pressures from the company, but he is also responsible for his crew and his license. He has the option of saying, 'No, I'm not going to sail that ship,' and walking off."

### International Enforcer

A master's refusal to sail may tie up one ship, but Eldridge has authority to stop a flotilla. If he finds serious infractions, he can tie up millions in cargo, ships and schedules. He gave an example of a Panamanian sugar ship that came into port without a main engine. It maneuvered as far as the anchorage, and then the Coast Guard brought it in the rest of the way with tugs. "And when we got on it," Eldridge said, "we found it had fire pumps that didn't work and the fire hoses were full of holes." Even though the ship flies the flag of another country, Eldridge can enforce international standards once the ship reaches our coastal waters.

Has Eldridge been pressured by countries to release their ships? "Although they never objected," he said, "on occasion, representatives have implied that the Coast Guard was overstepping its jurisdiction. Other than an inference that they might not be

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the licensing procedure for tugboat pilots. "Anyone walking off the streets could drive those inland tugboats that would push 20, 30, 40 barges." Cargoes could include anything from grain to chlorine gas.

### Near Disaster

When a barge loaded with chlorine gas broke loose from the string and jammed in one of the locks on the river, Eldridge had the makings of a disaster. "Eventually they got the chlorine out of the barge, but they evacuated thousands of people in Louisville." If the liquid had vaporized a gas cloud could have done serious damage to the population. As a result of this accident, Eldridge set up a vessel traffic system for the area.

On his next assignment he traveled down to the mouth of the Mississippi, where he was chief of commercial vessel safety in a district that included Galveston, Baton Rouge, Mobile and parts of Florida. Then he made a full circle, returning to Boston to work and choosing to live in Duxbury. "The school system was good, I knew what the town was like and my family was here." His mother is Virginia Shabaz of Chestnut St.; his sister is Charlene Goodrich of Woodridge Rd.

Before he retires in 6 years, Eldridge hopes to return to Alaska. His wife, Marta, said, "If you ask for it, you always get it. It's only the people who have been there before who ask to go back. If you haven't been there you're kind of afraid to go."

Both she and her husband describe the country as "beautiful." Eldridge said, "If you take in all the surrounding area, Juneau and Ketchikan are just a little bit bigger than Duxbury with about 13,000 people. And Juneau is the capital. There are no roads in there; you can't drive there. Everything comes in by boat or plane."

They explained that the overwhelming drama of the glacial cliffs which meet the sea in fjord-like inlets attract the kinds of passenger ships like the one which went down recently. Eldridge used to patrol that area and he said, "The Gulf of Alaska is kind of nasty most of the year, but in the winter, it's particularly bad." Yet the draw of the scenery overcomes the risk of the sea.

The land might have been dramatic, but the weather was wet. Eldridge said, "I

regulations that followed in the wake of that disaster. But when Eldridge said, "Since I've been here, we've been able to keep most of the oil in the vessels and off the beaches," he gave credit to the new regulations, the work of his staff and to luck.

When a Norwegian gasoline tanker, the *Afghanistan* (ships seem to be incongruously named) went aground on the shoals off Nantucket 2 years ago, Eldridge nearly had to call the boys in New Jersey. But the tanker's hull, which had been reinforced to cut through the ice flows of the North Sea, held tight.

Not all spills result in black, gooey water. He described a recent accident when 36,000 gallons of aluminum sulfate bubbled into Salem Harbor. The chemical is used to "scrub" water so the harbor, Eldridge said, "was a beautiful Mediterranean blue."

At times pollution is of secondary importance. The ridge was on the scene when the *Exxon Chester*, carrying hot asphalt, ripped open the *Regal Sword*, carrying scrap iron. The *Regal Sword* quickly rolled over on her side and Eldridge coordinated scooping men out of the water, not oil. "We lucked out -- there were no fatalities," he said.

#### Georges Bank

With the imminent development of Georges Bank for oil exploration, Eldridge has been preparing an emergency plan in case of an accident. "I've already told them (a consortium of the oil companies) that prior to drilling out there we'll have an exercise to get the equipment out on the water in severe conditions and see what it can do."

Keeping the coastal waters clear of runaway oil and overboard seamen is just part of Eldridge's work. "In my present job, I wear 4 different hats. One is as commanding officer of marine safety; another is as captain of the Port of Boston zone. I'm also officer in charge of marine inspection which has certain regulatory functions, primarily the inspection of merchant vessels, and the investigation of incidents involving any U.S. vessels, in U.S. navigational water. We examine the masters, mates and seamen, issue them a license, but if they do anything wrong we investigate and prosecute them before the administrative law judge."

Eldridge is also the "pre-designated federal on-scene coordinator of oil and hazardous substance spills in coastal waters." He laughed, "That's the one who's supposed to know all the answers and gets to see it's all cleaned up."

Because Boston was the first U.S. port to berth the super-sized LNG tankers, Eldridge is an expert in the safe transportation of this volatile liquid. He recently returned from Ottawa where he helped the Canadians work up rules for the introduction of the LNG tankers into their harbors.

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comes in the Gulf, it hangs right over these cities and dumps all its moisture -- as snow in Juneau, as rain in Ketchikan." Marta, who stayed on soggy land while her husband sailed out from under the cloud cover, said, "It rained for 360 days out of 365. The year before we got to Ketchikan they had 212 inches of rain."

#### Eagles on the Front Lawn

One summer between showers, the Eldridges watched a pair of bald eagles teach their babies to fly. From their living room window, the human family watched as the adult birds dropped each eaglet and then swooped under to buoy them.

The Eldridges enjoyed Alaska for more than the scenery and wildlife. Marta said, "The people are different. We hadn't been off the ferry for 2 hours and we went into the grocery store and they cashed our check -- didn't even ask for any ID. It was that way all over. Talk about people giving you the shirt off their backs, these people really did."

By comparison, Marta said, "New Englanders are more reserved." Eldridge agreed, "It's the way we are and I'm from here, so I can say it. You don't find the back-slapping kind of thing you find in, say, the South. We're more private, keep things in the home more. New Englanders don't have neighbors over to dinner often, which is the case more in the South and Alaska." And Marta concluded, "But, of course, in Alaska there isn't anything else to do."

Making a home for the Eldridge children whose birth certificates read like a geography lesson (Rick, 17, Seattle; Kevin, 15, Ketchikan; Sandee, 11, New York) is important to Marta, who was born in Mexico and raised in Argentina. So an assignment to New Orleans was tolerable because they lived "right on the waterfront, went waterskiing and like shrimp. But the heat, humidity and the school systems are absolutely terrible down there," Eldridge said.

Home, then, is more than scenery and cupboards and closets. It's school systems and being part of a community. "A house is just a place to put your things until you get there, and once you're there, and home," Marta said. "If it weren't we would have nothing. We've been doing this for 18 years and if we hadn't had a feeling of home, there would be no family."